

# State needs control over pay for K-12 districts

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In a 2014 file photo, a small group of demonstrators stand on the steps of the Temple of Justice and in view of the Legislative Building as they advocate for more state spending on education prior to a hearing before the state Supreme Court, in Olympia, Wash. The court ordered lawmakers to explain why they haven't followed its orders to fix the way Washington pays for public education. Lawmakers, the governor and others say the court needs to be patient and give the Legislature more time to fulfill the orders from the 2012 McCleary decision.

ELAINE THOMPSON — AP

A huge bill is coming due for public schools in Washington with potentially \$1.4 billion payable this year by the Legislature to answer a Supreme Court ruling, and even more in later years.

Getting new money for school supplies, more kindergartens, and smaller classrooms is not the only battle to be fought, if legislators wish to escape their predicament with the state high court. The state's nine justices could impose sanctions later this spring based on an earlier finding that lawmakers were in contempt of court for failing to respond more fully to the court's findings on K-12 funding in the McCleary case.

The Washington Association of School Administrators and a few of their allies are now advancing the idea that whatever lawmakers do to boost salaries, they need to make sure the state assumes full costs of compensation in the long term, which could total hundreds of millions of dollars more than the cost of living increases that Gov. Jay Inslee has proposed.

Getting this done might be much simpler if the state bargained directly over wages and health care with the state teachers' unions, including the Washington Education Association, and leaving non-pay issues for its local affiliates. There is strong support among WASA's school administrators – including Raj Manhas, superintendent of North Thurston Public Schools – to try statewide bargaining.

And state schools chief Randy Dorn said this week he also sees the need for a new direction. "As we move toward the state taking total responsibility for the salaries of school employees involved in basic education, it's logical that we move to statewide bargaining, with room for regional cost-of-living adjustments," Dorn said in a statement in response to our query.

Such bargaining could reduce inequities between districts, make it easier for the state to develop a system of extra pay for those who work in parts of the state with high housing costs, and guide incentives for teachers to work in high-poverty schools.

The WEA argues against statewide bargaining, saying isn't possible because the state is not the employer and local school districts are. We're not convinced that is enough to kill this idea, and certainly the state's ongoing practice of bargaining wages with more than 40,000 home care workers who are not state employees already shows that a single contract could be used for those not directly employed by the state.

The need for new ways of doing business should be clear to all. The Supreme Court has said in its various McCleary-related rulings that it considers employee pay part of basic education and that the state's growing reliance on local, voter-approved levies to pay more than a quarter of local school costs, in many cases, is untenable. Using data from the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction WASA calculates that the state's share of labor costs has fallen from 99.1 percent in the 1987-88 school year to just 77 percent in 2012-13.

To make up that gap, according to WASA, 53 percent of local levies now are allocated to cover districts' share of pay and benefits.

Of course, statewide bargaining for pay and health benefits is not the only option. Several lawmakers including Republican Sen. Bruce Dammeier of Puyallup have been looking for new ways to sharply limit the local contributions for what should be state obligations. Among ideas battled around is a ban on using any levy money for basic education; the scope of state audits of school district finances could be expanded to accomplish this.

Another concept is a lower cap on what school districts can either raise with levies, or on the share devoted to pay, but caps enacted after a 1977 landmark ruling on school funding failed to hold.

But 35 years after Thurston County Superior Court Judge Robert Doran's first rulings that found the state wasn't meeting its constitutional obligation for school funding,

Washington is back in a familiar boat. We'll be in this boat again without a new way of doing business.